

# Sewer district grants help neighborhoods halt floods, beautify

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It used to be that the residents of Cleveland's Milligan Avenue would find themselves wading through water that flooded their street during heavy rains, the melting of winter's snow or the disastrous combination of both.

But the rising waters of the Big Creek Chevy Branch, which flows under Milligan Avenue, appear to be pretty much a problem of the past, in large part thanks to a stream restoration project by the regional sewer district that has helped get the water flowing toward Lake Erie instead of pooling in the West Side neighborhood.

In suburban University Heights, residents of Ashurst Road faced a similar storm water problem: Heavy rains would send thousands of gallons of water sweeping across a vacant lot and into neighbors' yards.

A \$10,000 sewer district grant allowed the city last year to transform what had long been an eyesore into the pride of the neighborhood, a parklike woodlands rain garden that uses native trees, shrubs and plants to capture and clean water on the property.

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Starr said the policy should include a whistle-blower exclusion to allow a board member to expose wrongdoing — something the district should be extremely familiar with given past scandals — and said he had concerns about the definition of “confidential information” because the policy states something is confidential if the board or the person providing it “designates” it so. And just in case it's not clear that Starr's actions are behind the changes, the revised policy contains examples of potential breaches, one of which begins: “A board member, in order to gain political or professional advantage, discloses to non-[district] individuals...”

Starr doesn't sound fazed.

“They know I'm not afraid to take positions or run up the hill with a machine gun,” he said.

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## Tipoff

MICHAEL K. MCINTYRE



## Sewer ethics policy awaits main critic

The board of the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District wants to adopt a revised ethics and confidentiality policy. But board members have tabled the vote twice despite having a quorum because they want the district's chief critic, board member Gary Starr, to be present for the roll call.

He has been absent the last two meetings, and some of the revisions are aimed squarely at him and at keeping board information out of public view.

Starr, the mayor of Middleburg Heights, often blasts board actions via press releases or media interviews.

He was called on the carpet last year after divulging details of the district's \$3 billion plan to reduce sewage overflows to comply with EPA rules. That information, the board contended, was confidential because it was discussed in a closed-door meeting. Starr was accused of political grandstanding. He said he was just standing up for ratepayers.

Starr sued the board in federal court over the matter, fearing he would be censured. But the suit was later dropped and no reprimand issued.

Starr, who will miss the next meeting, too, because he'll be on vacation, said that he appreciates the board waiting for him but that his position on the policy as it has been proposed is no mystery:

“I will vote no. Why? Because the revised ethics policy is contrary to open government and transparency. Moreover, it does not represent my position on total and absolute reform of the sewer district.”

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